

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE COMMODITY GAP: CONSUMERISM AND THE MODERN HOME

As a normal part of life, thrift now is un-American.

—WILLIAM H. WHYTE, JR., 1956

No man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist.
He has too much to do.

—WILLIAM J. LEVITT, DEVELOPER OF LEVITTOWN, 1948¹

THE SEXUALLY charged, child-centered family took its place as the embodiment of the postwar American dream. The most tangible symbol of that dream was the suburban home—the locale of the good life, the evidence of democratic abundance. It did not take long for this consumer-laden dream house to land squarely in the middle of cold war politics. One remarkable example demonstrates the direct link between the suburban American dream and the international dynamics of the cold war. In 1948, when Europe was still recovering from World War II, American officials worried that political instability might lead some nations to embrace communism. Leaders in the United States

were particularly worried that Italy might go communist. A critical election was approaching, and there were several “hot spots” in the country where impoverished Italians appeared to be leaning toward voting for the Communist Party. At that time, Richard Moore, an aide to California congressman Richard Nixon, was trying to figure out a way to influence the Italian election. Prior to joining Nixon’s congressional staff in Washington, Moore had worked in the television industry in California. So he contacted John Guedel, creator of several early television shows, and asked for help.

Guedel came up with an idea: the “Win a Future” contest. Anyone who entered the contest had a chance to “win a future,” which included a house in the newly completed suburban development of Panorama City, in the San Fernando Valley. The house would contain the finest new appliances and furnishings, and the lucky winner would also receive a new car and a job. According to Guedel, anyone could enter the contest by writing a letter stating in 100 words or less why it is better to live under capitalism than communism, enclosing ten cents, and sending it to the television station. Each week, one contestant was selected to appear on the television show *People Are Funny* and have an opportunity to solve a riddle in order to “win a future.” Six hundred and forty thousand Americans entered the contest. The letters were collected and sent to Italy, along with CARE packages of food. The United States Army translated the letters and distributed them with the CARE packages to Italian voters in key areas at risk of electing communists. Apparently, the effort worked: The communists were defeated in the 1948 election in Italy. Meanwhile, contestant Vivienne George finally solved the riddle and “won a future.” As it turned out, the future she won was not so bright. She and her husband, a disabled World War II veteran, only lived in the house for a few months. They were the first residents to move into Panorama City, and they were too isolated, especially considering his medical needs. The promised job never materialized, and the national notoriety left the Georges vulnerable to the demands of many people who believed that the couple were now fabulously wealthy.²

Although Vivienne George was the only one to “win a future,” like many other Americans she discovered that the American dream did not fully live up to its promise. But the suburban home, complete with modern appliances and furnishings, continued to serve as a tangible symbol of the American way of life, and as a powerful weapon in the cold war propaganda arsenal. A decade after the “Win a Future” contest, Richard Nixon was no longer a congressman. He was now vice president under Dwight D. Eisenhower. In 1959, Eisenhower sent Nixon to represent the United States at the American Exhibition in Moscow,

where a “model home,” similar to the one in Panorama City won by Vivienne George, was on display. Let us now return briefly to the site of the famous “kitchen debate,” where Vice President Richard M. Nixon articulated the essence of American superiority by pointing to the consumer-laden suburban home. The ideal home Nixon described was one that obliterated class distinctions and accentuated gender distinctions. The “model home” he extolled was not a mansion but a modest ranch-style structure, “within the price range of the average U.S. worker,” complete with modern appliances that would “make easier the life of our housewives.” Although Vivienne George had to solve a riddle to win her house in the suburbs because she couldn’t otherwise afford it, for Nixon, the most important feature of the suburban home was its availability to Americans of all classes.

“Let us start with some of the things in this exhibit,” Nixon began. “You will see a house, a car, a television set—each the newest and most modern of its type we produce. But can only the rich in the United States afford such things? If this were the case, we would have to include in our definition of rich the millions of America’s wage earners.” Nixon felt certain that the possibility of homeownership would defuse the most dangerous potential of class conflict. As he explained to Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, “Our steel workers, as you know, are on strike. But any steel worker could buy this house. They earn \$3 an hour. This house costs about \$100 a month to buy on a contract running twenty-five to thirty years.” Khrushchev countered, “We have steel workers and we have peasants who also can afford to spend \$14,000 for a house.” But for Nixon, homeownership represented even more than a comfortable way of life; it was the validation of the free enterprise system.³

Nixon’s frame of reference was the family: “There are 44 million families in the United States. Twenty-five million of [them] live in houses or apartments that have as much or more floor space than the one you see in this exhibit. Thirty-one million families own their own homes and the land on which they are built. America’s 44 million families own a total of 56 million cars, 50 million television sets and 143 million radio sets. And they buy an average of nine dresses and suits and 14 pairs of shoes per family per year.”

Nixon then described other miracles of domestic technology. Pointing to a television screen, he said, “We can see here what is happening in other parts of the home.” Khrushchev, scorning the American obsession with gadgets, chided, “This is probably always out of order. . . . Don’t you have a machine that puts food into the mouth and pushes it down? Many things you’ve shown us are interesting but they are not needed in life. . . . They are merely gadgets.” Yet both

leaders took the commodity gap seriously. The Soviet premier continued, "Newly built Russian houses have all this equipment right now. Moreover, all you have to do to get a house is to be born in the Soviet Union. So I have a right to a house. In America if you don't have a dollar, you have the right to sleep on the pavement. Yet you say that we are slaves of communism."

Khrushchev further accused Americans of building houses to last only twenty years, so builders could continually sell new ones. "We build firmly," said the Soviet leader. "We build for our children and grandchildren." But Nixon argued that after twenty years, the older home or kitchen would be obsolete. Linking consumer aspirations to scientific expertise, he explained that the American system was designed to take advantage of new inventions and new techniques. Unimpressed, Khrushchev replied, "This theory does not hold water." But for Nixon the theory did hold water, for it reflected his belief in the potential for individualism and upward mobility.

The metaphor that prevailed throughout the debate was that of a race. But it was not the arms race or the space race; it was the consumer race—centered on the home. Khrushchev estimated that it would take only seven years before the USSR would reach the American standard of living. Already in eight years, grain and milk output had nearly doubled, and television sets were up from sixty-seven thousand to a million. The terms of the cold war were set in these figures. Nixon was willing to concede Russian successes in the space race, but he argued that domestic consumer goods were the most meaningful measure of American superiority over the Soviet Union: "There are some instances where you may be ahead of us, for example in the development of the thrust of your rockets for the investigation of outer space; there may be some instances in which we are ahead of you—in color television, for instance." Not to be outdone, Khrushchev claimed, "No, we are up with you on this, too." Nixon remarked, "We welcome this kind of competition because when we engage in it, no one loses, everyone wins." Thus, the commodity gap took precedence over the missile gap.

In Nixon's vision, the suburban ideal of homeownership would tame two potentially disruptive forces: women and workers. In appliance-laden houses across the country, working-class as well as business-class breadwinners could fulfill the new American work-to-consume ethic. Homeownership would lessen class consciousness among workers, who would set their sights toward the middle-class ideal. The family home would be the place where a man could display his success through the accumulation of consumer goods. Women would reap rewards for domesticity by surrounding themselves with commodities; they

would remain content as housewives because appliances would ease their burdens. For both men and women, homeownership would reinforce aspirations for upward mobility and diminish the potential for social unrest.

Nixon was not the only one who believed that the American preoccupation with procurement would be a safeguard against the threat of class warfare and communism. Mayor Joseph Darst of St. Louis, expressing the views of liberal anticommunists, wrote to the city's board of aldermen in 1951 that if everyone had good housing, "no one in the United States would need to worry today about the threat of communism in this country. Communists love American slums. Our clearance of these slums and erection of adequate housing is one of the most effective answers we can give communism locally."⁴

For those who agreed that economic optimism was essential to keep the free enterprise system alive and well, there were reasons to rejoice. The postwar years witnessed a huge increase in discretionary spending power, an increase that surpassed gains in income or prices. Between 1947 and 1961, the number of families rose 28 percent, national income increased over 60 percent, and the group with discretionary income (those with money for nonnecessities) doubled. Rather than putting this money aside for a rainy day, Americans were inclined to spend it. A 1946 Gallup poll indicated that in spite of persistent pockets of poverty and fears of another depression, the desire to spend was much stronger than the desire to save. This is not to say that the concern for future security was tossed to the wind; on the contrary, security remained a high priority. Americans were only slightly more hopeful about the economic future in 1945 than they had been in 1937 at the depth of the depression. Fears of another depression were widespread, and one-third of the population was still in poverty.⁵ But the increase in income for the middle and working classes, combined with new governmental supports, encouraged Americans to invest their money in purchases. Social Security no doubt eased their fears of poverty in old age, and veterans' mortgages facilitated expenditures for homeownership. Americans responded with guarded optimism by making purchases that would strengthen their sense of security. In the postwar years, investing in one's own home, along with the trappings that would enhance family life, seemed the best way to plan for the future.

Instead of rampant spending for personal luxury items, Americans were likely to spend their money at home. In the five years after World War II, consumer spending increased 60 percent, but the amount spent on household furnishings and appliances rose 240 percent. In the same five years, purchases for food rose only 33 percent, and for clothing a mere 20 percent. From the depression

onward, the trend in spending was striking. Between 1935 and 1950, the money income of Americans increased 50 percent. But this increase was not divided evenly among purchasing categories. Expenditures for food and drink increased only 30 percent; for clothing, 53 percent; for personal care, 69 percent; and for education, 73 percent. These increases were modest compared to the increases in expenditures for household operation (108 percent), recreation (185 percent), and automobiles (205 percent). In the four years following the end of the war, Americans purchased 21.4 million cars, 20 million refrigerators, 5.5 million stoves, and 11.6 million televisions and moved into over 1 million new housing units each year. The same patterns extended into the 1950s, a decade in which prosperity continued to spread.⁶

The locale for this consumer-oriented family life was suburbia. The suburban home caught the imagination as well as the purse strings of postwar Americans. A study of the psychology of spending noted, "The impact of suburbia on consumer behavior can hardly be overstated. . . . Young people chose to marry early, to have several children in the early years of marriage, to live in . . . nice neighborhoods, and to have cars, washing machines, refrigerators, television sets, and several other appliances at the same time." Americans channeled their spending accordingly. With the exception of the very poor, those of ample as well as modest means exhibited a great deal of conformity in their consumption attitudes and behavior. Spending patterns reflected widely shared beliefs about the good life, which seemed within reach of many, even those of the lower-middle and working classes.⁷

Consumer patterns, then, reflected one more aspect of containment behavior as the nation's affluent majority poured their income into homes and family pursuits. The old version of the virtuous home was a much more ascetic one. Still, the values associated with domestic spending upheld traditional American concerns with pragmatism and morality, rather than opulence and luxury. Purchasing for the home helped alleviate traditional American uneasiness with consumption: the fear that spending would lead to decadence. Family-centered spending reassured Americans that affluence would strengthen the American way of life. The goods purchased by middle-class consumers, like a modern refrigerator or a house in the suburbs, were intended to foster traditional values.⁸

Pragmatism and family enrichment were the keys to virtuous consumerism. The commodities that people bought promised to reinforce home life and uphold traditional gender roles. After all, American women were housewives; their lives were functional, not merely ornamental. In general, male breadwinners provided the income for household goods, and their wives purchased them.

Public opinion polls taken after the war indicate that both men and women were generally opposed to employment for women and believed that a woman who ran a home had a “more interesting time” than did a woman with a full-time job. There were, however, circumstances in which employment for women was approved—especially if the income it generated fostered family life. For example, one poll showed that postwar women and men believed that if a young couple could not marry because the man was not earning enough to support them both, “the girl should take a job so they can get married right away.”⁹ By and large, however, employment for married women was discouraged. Given these prevailing attitudes, it is no wonder that Nixon continually interchanged the words *woman* and *housewife* as he extolled the American way of life at the Moscow exhibition.

Yet that equation should be examined closely, since not all married women were full-time homemakers during the 1950s. In fact, the postwar years brought more wives into the paid labor force than ever before. Americans felt a great deal of ambivalence toward women’s employment—a legacy of the depression and the war. On the one hand, it was unfortunate if a wife had to hold a job; on the other hand, it was considered far worse if the family was unable to purchase what were believed to be necessities for the home.

During these years, the very definition of household needs changed to include many more consumer items. Since it was the homemaker’s responsibility to purchase these items, women sought employment, ironically, to promote their role as consumers. The economic importance of women’s role as consumers cannot be overstated, for it kept American industry rolling and sustained jobs for the nation’s male providers. Nearly the entire increase in the gross national product in the mid-1950s was due to increased spending on consumer durables and residential construction.¹⁰ Many employed wives considered their jobs secondary to their role as consumers and in tune with the ethic of togetherness and subordination that characterized their marital relationships. This was one legacy that depression-bred daughters inherited: Women sought employment to bolster the family budget but not to disrupt domestic power relationships. As long as their employment provided a secondary source of income and did not undermine the authority of the male breadwinner, it was acceptable to the family.¹¹

The house and commodity boom also had tremendous propaganda value, for it was those affluent homes, complete with breadwinner and homemaker, that provided evidence of the superiority of the American way of life. Since much of the cold war was waged in propaganda battles, this vision of domesticity was a powerful weapon. Although they may have been unwitting soldiers, women who

marched off to the nation's shopping centers to equip their new homes joined the ranks of American cold warriors. As newscaster and noted cold warrior George Putnam said in 1947, shopping centers were "concrete expressions of the practical idealism that built America . . . plenty of free parking for all those cars that we capitalists seem to acquire. Who can help but contrast [them] with what you'd find under communism?"¹²

Consumers no doubt had fewer global concerns in mind. They had saved their money for specific purposes. During the war, a survey of bank depositors indicated that 43 percent were eager to spend their money on "future needs," and half of those specified purchases for the home. Leading architects helped give tangible form to these desires by publishing plans for "dream houses" in leading magazines like the *Ladies Home Journal*. Construction companies also fed consumer longings by selling scrapbooks for saving ideas for future houses, with sections divided into the various rooms of the home. The Andersen Window Company, for example, which was well aware of the potential market, distributed three hundred and fifty thousand embossed scrapbooks before the end of the war. By June 1944, appliances topped the list of the most desired consumer items. When asked what they hoped to purchase in the postwar years, Americans listed washing machines first, then electric irons, refrigerators, stoves, toasters, radios, vacuum cleaners, electric fans, and hot water heaters. Advertisers claimed that these items constituted the American way of life that the soldiers were fighting for.¹³

The pent-up desires for homes and appliances represented something more than mere fantasies of luxurious living. The need for wartime housing was great. Dislocated war workers needed \$100 million worth of new housing, which prompted a construction boom during the war. By 1943, residential real estate buying reached levels unknown since the 1920s. But wartime building was inadequate to meet the increasing need. The housing shortage reached crisis proportions after the war. In 1945, 98 percent of American cities reported shortages of houses, and more than 90 percent reported shortages of apartments. By 1947, 6 million families were doubling up with relatives or friends. The housing industry gained tremendous momentum after the war in the face of these immediate needs, and it took advantage of the conversion of production technology for peacetime use.¹⁴ Supply and demand came together to foster an explosion in residential housing after the war. But the expansion did not take place equally in all types of housing; nor were the new dwellings available to all Americans. Largely as a result of governmental policies, massive suburban developments of single-family houses took precedence over apartments and inner-city dwellings.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (the GI Bill of Rights) created a Veterans Administration (VA) program of guaranteed mortgage insurance, expanding the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) program dating back to 1934. The new programs, which provided federal insurance for loans to white veterans, encouraged private investors to enter the housing mortgage market. In addition, the tax benefits for homeowners became substantial in the 1940s. The government also financed large suburban tracts, such as those built by William Levitt. With all these incentives for building and purchasing suburban residences, it soon became cheaper to buy than to rent. Provided they were white, veterans could buy homes in Levittown, with a thirty-year mortgage and no down payment, by spending only \$56 per month. At the same time, the average apartment rental in many cities was \$93. These overpriced, often substandard apartments were left to Americans of color, who were excluded from the suburbs. When asked why black families were not allowed to purchase homes in Levittown, William Levitt claimed that he was in the business of building houses, not solving social problems. As a result of such racist attitudes and the policies they generated, social problems that did not exist at the time emerged in the years to come.¹⁵

Postwar governmental policies fostered the construction of the vast majority of new housing in the suburbs. Housing starts went from 114,000 in 1944 to an all-time high of 1,692,000 in 1950. The cold war made a profound contribution to suburban sprawl. In 1951, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* devoted an issue to "defense through decentralization" that argued in favor of depopulating the urban core to avoid a concentration of residences or industries in a potential target area for a nuclear attack. Joining this effort was the American Road Builders Association, a lobbying group second only to the munitions industry. As a result of these pressures, Congress passed the Interstate Highway Act in 1956, which provided \$100 billion to cover 90 percent of the cost for forty-one thousand miles of national highways. When President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the bill into law, he stated one of the major reasons for the new highway system: "[In] case of atomic attack on our key cities, the road net must permit quick evacuation of target areas."¹⁶

Many people believed that the suburbs also provided protection against labor unrest, which might lead to class warfare and its presumed inevitable result, communism. The report of a 1948 meeting of a San Francisco businessmen's association, chaired by the ex-president of the National Association of Home Builders, argued for the dispersion of industry outside central cities: "Conditions under which employees live, as well as work, vitally influence

management-labor relations. Generally, large aggregations of labor in one big [central-city] plant are more subject to outside disrupting influences, and have less happy relations with management, than in smaller [suburban] plants.”¹⁷

The suburban growth that resulted from these policies was neither universal nor inevitable; in Europe, centralization rather than decentralization predominated. In the United States, the FHA and VA mortgage policies, the highway system, the financing of sewers, the government subsidies for suburban developments such as Levittown, and the placing of public housing in the center of urban ghettos facilitated the dispersal of the white middle class into the suburbs and contributed to the decay of the inner cities. Furthermore, blacks were excluded from the suburbs by de facto segregation and the FHA’s redlining policies that denied mortgages to black families, more than by poverty. Although there were a small number of black as well as racially integrated suburbs, the vast majority of suburban neighborhoods were restricted to whites.¹⁸

In 1946, as a result of all these supports for homeownership, for the first time a majority of the nation’s white families lived in homes they owned. Over the next fifteen years, 12 million more families became homeowners. By the 1950s, most of those who purchased homes did so to buy a better house or move into a better neighborhood. Loans available to homeowners favored purchase over repair, which further spurred the movement of the white population into newly constructed suburban developments. Between 1950 and 1970, the suburban population doubled, from 36 million to 74 million; 83 percent of the nation’s growth during those years took place in the suburbs.¹⁹

Although the suburbs were clearly designated for whites only, they offered a picture of domestic comfort available to those with modest incomes. These homes represented the American way of life, democratic and affordable, that Nixon would extoll in Moscow. Confirming Nixon’s assertion of the American desire for change and newness, upgrading was a widespread motive for spending. The nation’s consumers continually replaced, improved, or expanded their homes, appliances, and cars, long before those items had worn out. Federal policies, combined with increased affluence, made it possible for white Americans of moderate means to indulge their desires for newness and mobility.²⁰ In these ways, the cold war goal of defusing class conflict succeeded in the suburbs, where families of white-collar and blue-collar workers lived side by side.

Federal programs did more than simply blur class lines and spur a trend toward homeownership in the expanding suburbs. Policies that reflected and encouraged the American domestic ideology fostered and reinforced a particular kind of family life. In effect, these federal programs provided subsidies and

incentives for couples to marry and have several children. Houses were designed to accommodate families with small children. Builders and architects assumed that men would be away at work during the day and houses would be occupied by full-time homemaker-mothers. In the first Levittown, a standardized suburban development built by William Levitt, 17,400 houses accommodated 82,000 residents. The structures were mass-produced and inexpensive, with a flexible interior design that was easily expandable if the family increased in size. Kitchens were near the front entrance, so mothers could keep an eye on their children as they cooked. Living rooms featured picture windows facing the backyard, also to facilitate the supervision of children. Appliances were included in the purchase price. The one-story design gave the home an informal look and was practical for families with young children, since there were no stairs, which could be dangerous. As young parents of the baby boom moved into these homes, it is no wonder that the first Levittown quickly earned the nicknames “Fertility Valley” and “The Rabbit Hutch.”²¹

By stimulating these particular kinds of suburban housing developments and providing subsidies to homeowners, the federal government effectively underwrote the baby boom, along with the lifestyle and community arrangements that fostered traditional gender roles in the home. The government, along with the National Association of Home Builders, provided plans in the 1950s for smaller, inexpensive ranch-style homes that would allow for openness, adequate room for appliances and other consumer goods, and the easy supervision of children. Appliances were intended not to enable housewives to have more free time to pursue their own interests, but to help them achieve higher standards of cleanliness and efficiency, while allowing more time for child care. The suburban home was planned as a self-contained universe. Technological advances made housework efficient and professional; lawn mowers and cake mixes guaranteed a perfect result. In addition, homes were designed for enjoyment, fun, and togetherness. Family members would not need to go out for recreation or amusements, since they had swing sets, playrooms, and backyards with barbecues at home.²²

Leisure pursuits encouraged a further infatuation with commodities. One of the most powerful of all postwar entertainments—the television set—sat squarely in people’s living rooms. By the 1950s, televisions were selling at a rate of over 5 million a year. Television also fostered the classless ideal. Commercials extended the reach of advertising into people’s homes, as did the abundant lifestyles portrayed on the screen. As historian George Lipsitz noted, situation comedies in the postwar years, especially those aimed at ethnic or working-class audiences, eased the transition from a depression-bred psychology of scarcity to

an acceptance of spending. In shows like *I Remember Mama* or *The Honeymooners*, dramas of daily life often revolved around the purchase of consumer goods for the home. Characters in these programs urged each other to buy on installment, “live above our means—the American way,” and spend rather than save. Commodities would solve the problem of the discontented housewife, foster pride in the provider whose job offered few intrinsic rewards, and allow children to “fit in” with their peers. Consumerism provided a means for assimilation into the American way of life: classless, homogeneous, and family-centered.²³

The desire for the single-family home as a refuge against a chaotic world was not a postwar creation. Indeed, it dates back to housing reformers of the nineteenth century who first articulated the suburban family ideal. But it achieved new vigor in the postwar years, largely because the ideal was now within reach of most middle-class and many working-class Americans. In its modern manifestation, the suburban ranch-style home was to blend in with nature. As historian Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., observed, “The ranch house . . . was . . . seen as creating a unity with nature, but it was a unity that pictured nature as a tamed and open environment. . . . The 1950s design standards conceived of the natural world in a simplified and controlled way that eliminated anything that was wild or irregular.”²⁴ (See Figure 15.)

The contained, natural style, enhanced by modern technology and design, offered a sense of security as well as privatized abundance. The natural look was more personal and even sensual than the formalized structures of public life and business. And although most ranch-style tract homes were relatively small, standardized one-story structures, the flexible interior space allowed for individuality—something increasingly lacking in the highly organized and bureaucratic world of work.²⁵

Who purchased these homes, and did they satisfy their owners’ needs and desires? According to surveys at the time, about half those who purchased houses in 1949 and 1950 were white World War II veterans in their mid-thirties with young children. The second half were about ten years older; their housing needs or financial resources had changed, prompting them to buy larger homes in the suburbs. Both groups were parents of the baby-boom generation. The second group included Americans of the age and circumstances of the respondents to the Kelly Longitudinal Study (KLS). The residents of Levittown, however, were more likely to belong to the first group: younger, less affluent, and largely working class. In his study of Levittown, Herbert Gans found that most of the residents claimed to be satisfied with their living arrangements.²⁶



FIGURE 15 Ranch-style suburban home, built circa 1950. The style exudes a sheltered look of protection and privacy, surrounded by a tamed and controlled natural world. (Courtesy of Judy Tyler.)

Nevertheless, there were frustrations. Like expectations for exciting sexuality or fulfilling child rearing, the suburban ideal often promised more than it delivered. Many homeowners wished for more space but had to make do with smaller houses because of financial constraints. If spaciousness was an elusive goal for many suburbanites, so was the life of the happy housewife. Women in Levittown often complained about feeling trapped and isolated, facing endless chores of housekeeping and tending to children. For them, suburban life was not a life of fun and leisure but of exhausting work and isolation. In addition, since houses and neighborhoods were created with young children in mind, adolescents often chafed against the small rooms, lack of privacy, constant supervision, and absence of stores, restaurants, and other public gathering places where they could socialize in their neighborhoods. And although parents frequently mentioned the benefits of togetherness and the ability to spend more time with their families, the time-consuming commute for the men, and for the 25 percent of suburban women who were employed, actually reduced the amount of time available for families to share. Nevertheless, most homeowners expressed contentment with their residences, largely because they were significantly more spacious and comfortable than their previous dwellings, even if they did not

measure up to one's "dream house."²⁷ Once again, postwar Americans lowered their expectations and expressed satisfaction with their suburban lot.

Although these suburban tracts have borne the brunt of scorn for their lack of individuality and mass-produced sameness, they did offer a modicum of comfort and convenience to growing families of modest means. Most of the contract-built houses, like those in Levittown, had central heating, indoor plumbing, telephones, automatic stoves, refrigerators, and washing machines—conveniences that most middle-class Americans would not like to sacrifice. Yet these isolated enclaves also weakened extended-family ties, promoted homogeneity in neighborhoods, intensified racial segregation, encouraged conformity, and fostered a style of life based on traditional gender roles in the home.²⁸

With the exception of avant-garde intellectuals and a small number of politically active feminists, few Americans articulated viable alternatives to the suburban lifestyle. Those who complained that life did not fit the ideal, like overworked housewives in Levittown, generally tried to alleviate their miseries with more money or goods. The ideal itself was rarely called into question, at least not publicly. Nevertheless, it was difficult to achieve, even for those who could afford it. These were by and large affluent middle-class Americans, well educated and ambitious, who believed in the American dream and belonged to the postwar consensus. The men worked in a highly organized and bureaucratized economy, struggling to earn enough to afford the trappings of the good life. Fully one-fourth of their wives entered the paid labor force, often in part-time jobs when the children were at school, to help pay for the appliances and furnishings they desired. Whether or not they were employed, the women focused their energies on the home, and together both husbands and wives sought personal fulfillment in their families, surrounded by children and consumer goods. They entered marriage with a utopian vision that included happiness as well as security. Did the "good life" in consumer-laden houses fulfill their expectations? The responses of the couples in the KLS provide some answers.

These men and women were among the comfortable group of white middle-class Americans able to take advantage of the fruits of prosperity. Eighty-five percent had a family income of over \$5,000 a year, although only thirteen percent earned over \$15,000. Most had never been heavily in debt; 98 percent had never received any kind of public assistance and only 30 percent had received aid from relatives or friends. Their purchasing habits reflected a national pattern: Personal extravagance was rare, but consumption for family enrichment was a high priority. They exhibited a desire for consumer goods combined with a concern for future financial security. About 70 percent of the sample spent between \$1,000 and \$3,000 in housing expenses per year; 63 percent had one

car and 33 percent had two cars. Slightly more than half had purchased their cars new.²⁹

Reflecting the values of the time, which linked status to consumer purchases as well as to occupational level, Kelly rated the “prestige value” of the cars each family owned. He determined that 45 percent fell into the “low prestige” category; 30 percent, the middle; and 22 percent, the high. Only 3 percent owned cars in the “super-high prestige” range, such as a Cadillac. Most said they had one or two thousand dollars to spend per year above basic needs and rarely, if ever, purchased anything on the installment plan. These, then, were well-to-do but conservative people, not extravagant consumers.³⁰

Like the rest of the middle class, the KLS respondents sought an expansive, affluent life within the security of their suburban homes. They spent their money in ways that would achieve that goal. The most important spending priority for 60 percent of the respondents was future financial security; for 23 percent, it was “increasing day-to-day living for family members”; and for 15 percent, it was “providing special opportunities for children.” Clearly, security and family-oriented pursuits, not personal luxuries, were their major concerns.³¹

These women and men reveal how deeply domestic aspirations were rooted in the postwar success ethic. The increasing emphasis on familial rewards as validation for work found expression in the popular literature as well. Elizabeth Long’s study of best-selling novels in the decade after World War II reveals a dramatic shift. In 1945, popular novels celebrated a vision of entrepreneurial success. But by 1955, themes had shifted toward more personal rewards. Heroes now made choices between work and leisure, family and the public world. They were more likely to accommodate themselves to the job and accept a secure place in the organizational hierarchy. According to Long, in these later novels the individual depends on others for happiness, and on the organization merely for a job. She called this theme the “corporate suburban” model, in contrast to the entrepreneurial model that prevailed a decade earlier. A typical mid-fifties best seller was Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, in which the protagonist is the new type of corporate hero who accommodates himself to bureaucratic constraints and wants to get ahead without sacrificing his family. Success is defined not by being at the top, but by having a secure, balanced life. In all these novels, successful career women are portrayed as “selfish”; female ambition is associated with sexual promiscuity. Suffering is the final lot for most such women in these stories.³²

Husbands in the KLS sample reflected the values expressed in these novels. The family, rather than the workplace, was the arena in which men demonstrated their achievement. Work appeared relatively meaningless without the

family to give purpose to men's efforts. When the men responded to an open-ended question asking what marriage had brought them that they could not have gained if they had remained single, many referred to the motivation it provided them to work hard and succeed. One husband wrote that his marriage gave him "the incentive to succeed and save for the future of my family." Others mentioned "greater incentive to succeed in business career," "feeling of accomplishment," "a family to work for," and "greater financial security." Echoing Nixon's remarks, many of these husbands wanted to make life better for their wives. In return, they expected to be appreciated. One husband complained that the "chief weakness of our marriage seems to be her failure to feel any . . . accomplishment from mutual efforts—particularly the family increases in net worth—house and car, furniture, insurance and bank accounts."³³

What is interesting about all these responses, particularly their frequency of occurrence, is that these husbands claimed that they would have had neither the motivation nor the success without marriage. Clearly, the provider role itself—and an economically dependent wife's recognition and appreciation of it—often offered a greater source of satisfaction than the actual work a man performed. Men were likely to place this aspect of their role in the center of their feelings of marital satisfaction. Ten husbands mentioned a better financial position as a benefit of marriage, another thirteen listed security and stability, and eleven others included social position; forty-three said marriage gave them a sense of purpose and responsibility. Together, these responses made up the third largest category of answers to the question of what marriage gave them that they would not have had without it, following closely after love and children.

The potential tragedy in this situation was that in spite of widespread prosperity, the provider role was a heavy burden, and not all men could be successful at it. Nor was the status of family breadwinner always adequate compensation for an otherwise monotonous or dissatisfying job. Just as material goods could contribute to marital harmony or even compensate for unhappiness to some extent, the failure to achieve or appreciate the fruits of prosperity could cause tension. One case illustrates how this could happen. Charlotte Oster complained that her aspirations for the good life were continually thwarted by her husband Brad's failure to achieve what she thought was an appropriate standard of living. "Having been forced to buy, after three wartime evictions, in a section which was not quite up to the social standards we were used to, we found it hard to accept the choice of friends of our oldest daughter. . . . It has been very hard to keep her within the boundaries of what we consider the proper social standards."

Charlotte's dissatisfaction was not lost on Brad, who was acutely aware of his inability to provide adequately for a wholesome family environment. Charlotte noted that he "is often upset because he thinks he hasn't provided for us as well as he would like to, and considers himself rather a failure." Nevertheless, she said that marriage brought her "four wonderful children, a home of our own, and always something better to look forward to and strive for." In the last section of the survey, in which respondents were asked to add anything that had not already been covered, Charlotte wrote the saga of her and Brad's marriage:

We were married during the depression years on a shoestring; my husband lost his job soon after, and went into business for himself, also with no capital. Though he was excellent in his field (photography), he didn't have the drive necessary to sell himself, and we had very meager living for several years, till he got a factory job during the war. Though he did well, he liked having his own independence, and after quitting at several factory jobs because he didn't like the unfairness or domination, he started another business with a partner, in aerial photography. Then a series of unfortunate setbacks began . . . eviction . . . hurricane damage to his place . . . injuries. . . . Now my husband is back working for another aerial concern, but he dislikes the work, feels he is too old to start at the bottom in another line, and therefore is inwardly upset a good deal of the time. . . . I have always felt that he shouldn't cater to his feeling of having to be independent, and that he should take any kind of a good job with a steady pay . . . which would give us all a much stronger feeling of security.

Charlotte's words demonstrate the centrality of the provider role and the difficulties it could create when it conflicted with a man's effort to achieve independence and personal fulfillment through work. The Osters' marriage lasted until 1961, when the couple divorced.³⁴

Although some husbands in the sample were content to be "organization men" as long as they could bring home the fruits of material success, others shared with Brad Oster a need for autonomy at work. But like him, they were likely to find that this need placed in jeopardy their ability to be good providers and, in turn, created marital friction. In a similar case, Maureen Gilford complained, "My husband is a tireless worker but insists on working *in his own business* and has made so many changes, it has been a constant struggle for 18 1/2 years with just one short period of success. I don't feel my standards are the cause of his hard work. So he is always tired and has little time for enjoyment. I feel badly about this, preferring that he get a modest *but steady salary* and work for

someone else. It has made me pinch pennies for years. Also, I have to work *hard* to increase our income and have little time for my own use. Too much housework, *too much work* altogether.”

Maureen longed for more leisure, more planned activities together, and more regular hours for her husband: “He is always tired and overworked.” She said he had some emotional disturbances from worry about business and too many job changes: “I wish he had *more time* for the children and for himself.” George Gilford wrote little in his report. He said marriage brought him “a good way of life.” He sacrificed “nothing material” and rated his marriage as generally satisfying, although he, too, worried about providing for his family’s needs, particularly a college education for both his children. Nevertheless, the fulfillment of the provider role would not necessarily satisfy George’s need for meaningful work.³⁵

The men in these cases faced the double anguish of failure to earn an adequate living in work they enjoyed and failure to be successful providers. For others, the breadwinner role, if performed successfully, might offer compensation for dissatisfaction at work. For women, marriage offered the possibility of material comforts and social standing—something a single woman earning a meager wage was not likely to achieve. Women also might gain some measure of autonomy in their domestic responsibilities—something that neither they nor their husbands were likely to find easily in the paid labor force. In addition, as wives of productive breadwinners, women might be able to gain the trappings of success unavailable to them in the work and public arenas. Suburban houses, after all, were not built with single working women in mind.

Some women focused their personal ambitions vicariously on their husband’s careers. One husband noted that this focus contributed to his own drive. “Being somewhat lazy to begin with,” he wrote, “the family and my wife’s ambition have made me more eager to succeed businesswise and financially.” Other wives were explicit about the centrality of material possessions to their marital and family satisfaction. One equated marriage with keeping up with the Joneses while at the same time expressing individuality: “We feel that our possessions are as good as if not better than our neighbors as they are different, antique as to modern, and we hold that thought to us dearly.”³⁶

Another woman, Lucille Windam, elaborated on this theme more fully, offering a shopping list of name-brand consumer items as evidence of a successful marriage. Yet her testimony also provides a glimpse of the difficulties that might arise even if—or perhaps because—one lived fully in accord with the domestic consumer ethic. She wrote:

One fortunate thing which is important in our marriage is our fortunate change in income bracket. When we were married my husband earned \$30 a week. We rented a five room flat, . . . had a baby, etc. Now we have five children and an income of over \$25,000 a year. We own our 8 room house—also a nice house on a lake. We have a sailboat, a Cris Craft, several small boats. We own our own riding horse which we keep at home. Our oldest child goes to a prep school. We have a Hammond organ in our home. . . . Our two sons at home own expensive instruments. We have and carry a lot of life insurance. Unless some disaster hits us, we see our way clear to educate all our children thru prep school and college.

It is important to note the kind of consumerism Lucille mentioned: All the goods were geared toward home, family leisure, education, and recreation. She did not mention diamonds, mink coats, or other personal luxuries. Yet here again is the potential hazard of domestic consumerism becoming the center of personal identity, for this woman's pride in her shopping-list definition of marital success was tempered by the complaint she added, almost as an afterthought: "My reaction to all this is that my husband doesn't seem content to save. He continually seeks something new to own; he doesn't keep his interest in any one thing very long." Her final remark is most telling, since it reflects the connection between success, consumerism, and domestic power relations: "He has terrific drive and aggressiveness, and I feel he tries to own all of us in the family too much." It is clear from Lucille's bitter words that the domestic consumer ethic, even at its most opulent, might be rife with tension. For her, family-oriented consumerism was the measure of successful married life and provided some compensation for her obvious disappointment in her relationship with her husband. For her husband, ambition and drive for power were expressed through his acquisition of goods and his total domination at home. Together they created an imperfect domestic relationship; nevertheless, that relationship clearly offered them both enough reasons for staying married.

Consumerism and children were the rewards that made the marriage worthwhile for Lucille Windam. In dedicating herself to the task of raising her children, she gained a sense of achievement that she believed she would not have found elsewhere. Her husband's ample income made her homemaking career possible. Even though she felt he was "overbearing, expects too much of me, and is inconsiderate of me," she appreciated his "ability to do almost anything he tries, his popularity, and his generosity to me financially." That financial generosity meant that she could devote herself to her children and provide them with all the finest things that money could buy: "I've worked hard at making my marriage

work—for my own and for my children's sake. . . . Certainly—materially—I never could attain the things I have now. Of course, the children are a great satisfaction. My job seems to swamp me sometimes but I am really very fond of my family and I do try to treat each as a special individual so each personality is important and each child can have every advantage we can possibly give. I can't imagine my life without children. I have no special talents so as a career person I'm sure I would not be a great success. As a mother and homemaker, I feel I am quite successful." Although she blamed her lack of "talent," rather than the lack of viable opportunities, she turned her creative efforts toward homemaking with the dedication and high standards of a professional.

Yet this domestic success was gained at a price: "Because of the size of our family, we have very little personal fun—I mean no clubs or activities. I used to be very active in PTA, church (taught Sunday school), and garden club, but my last two children now 4 and 2 years old changed all this. I just stay home with them and taxi my oldest boys around. Our oldest boy, almost 15, is away at prep school, but in our rural community I have to drive someone somewhere every day. I expect to get back into community life when my younger children are in school all day. I feel quite stale as though I don't use my mind enough." Still, she claimed to be satisfied with her marriage, in spite of a "stale" mind and an "overbearing, inconsiderate" husband. The children, apparently, made it all worthwhile; the affluence made it all possible.

Ronald Windam also claimed to be satisfied with their life together. He took pride in his role as provider. He wrote that marriage had brought him "stability, a family which I very much admire and enjoy doing my best to provide for." As for sacrifices, he wrote, "There is nothing other than Utopia, and a little give and take in sexual relationship. Other than that, there has been no sacrifice." Like so many of their peers, Ronald and Lucille Windam resigned themselves to their disappointments and looked on the bright side. Although their affluent suburban lifestyle fell short of their dreams, they were determined to make the best of it.³⁷

Consumerism in the postwar years went far beyond the mere purchase of goods and services. It included important cultural values, demonstrated success and social mobility, and defined lifestyles. It also provided the most vivid symbol of the American way of life: the affluent suburban home. There can be no doubt that the gender roles associated with domestic consumerism—homemaker and breadwinner—were central to the identity of many women and men at the time. It is also evident, however, that along with the ideology of sexual containment, postwar domestic consumerism required conformity to strict gender assumptions that were fraught with potential tensions and frustrations. Suburban homes

filled with material possessions could not always compensate for the dissatisfactions inherent in the domestic arrangements consumerism was intended to enhance and reinforce. In fact, those very domestic arrangements, although idealized and coveted at the time, were the source of countless miseries. As one looks through the “window of vulnerability” in the cold war era, one sees families inside their suburban homes struggling to achieve the postwar dream of abundance and security. Many men and women made heroic efforts to live according to the ideal of domestic containment. Some were able to carve out meaningful and rewarding lives within its limits. For others, the rewards remained elusive.